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ABSTRACT

Two studies explored the use of students' remembrances of school during preservice elementary education pedagogy courses. The studies assumed that cognitive schemas activated by writing remembrances would mediate the influence of experience on the interpretation of course content. The studies examined what kind of school experiences preservice educators reported in their remembrances and what influences the remembrances had on their interpretation of classroom events. Students wrote about a pleasant and an unpleasant elementary school remembrance. In study one, the focus was on the extent to which students thought about their school experiences in interpreting a hypothetical elementary classroom event (cheating). In study two, some students were asked to write extended remembrances. In both studies, students had to choose either supportive or restrictive actions to deal with classroom episodes. They shared their reactions to the application of reward and punishment concepts to classroom management problems. Results indicated that students whose written remembrances were related to the hypothetical classroom event and those whose remembrances were unrelated to the same event interpreted the event differently. Students in study two had positive perceptions of the value of writing and sharing remembrances, particularly extended remembrances, suggesting that the activity is instructionally useful. (SM)

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Using Student Remembrances of School in a Preservice Teacher Education Course: Exploratory Studies

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Using Student Remembrances of School in a Preservice Teacher Education Course: Exploratory Studies

More than one teacher educator has despaired at the inexperience of preservice teachers. Without experience in the school classroom, it is said, acquiring the content of education courses takes on the character of rote learning. Early field experience and, to some extent, the use of case or protocol material is intended to increase the relevance and meaningfulness of what is learned. It appears to be the case that field experience is valued by trainees themselves in somewhat these terms.

Of course, it is not literally true that preservice teachers have no relatable experience: all have had at least twelve years of experience as a pupil some of which almost surely is relatable to the psychological, social, pedagogical and other concepts to which they are exposed. While some instructors may well draw upon such personal experiences, the present writer is not aware of any attempts to make systematic use of trainees' personal experiences as a means of increasing the meaningfulness of course content. Yet personal experience in the role of a school pupil has some distinct advantages over vicarious experience gained through classroom observation.

To appreciate these advantages, it is useful to consider briefly the cognitive dimension of experience. Cognitively speaking, experience is said to be abstracted within cognitive structures or schemas that influence the assimilation and interpretation of new material at the same time undergoing

modification themselves (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Rumelhart, 1984). Schemas can be described as more, or less, highly elaborated. Those based on personal experience are likely to be more highly elaborated than those based on observation in the sense that they more fully represent the context in which a behavior or problem occurs: the conditions that precede, emotions that accompany and consequences that follow from that event.

A second, more practical advantage of personal experience is its availability. In the case of the second study to be reported in the present paper, limited availability of classrooms for observation led the author to make extensive use of personal experience along with simulated experiences and materials. Some comparative data on the perceived values of these resources is provided in the report of that study.

Availability in memory, however, does not imply salience. Initially, the personal experiences of the trainees involved in the present studies appeared to be vaguely remembered. An initial solicitation in class of such experiences produced little oral response. The trainees were then asked to reflect upon their school experience over several days and write a brief but reasonably full description or "remembrance" of that experience. With one or two exceptions, this request produced remembrances many of which were interesting and some even compelling. The act of reconstructing experiences in the form of written remembrances might be assumed to have changed incipient schemas to activated schemas.

The purpose of the two studies reported in this paper was to explore the use of preservice teachers' remembrances of school in a teacher education course. An assumption of the studies was that cognitive schemas activated by the writing of remembrances would mediate the influence of experience on the interpretation of course content. Two general questions were posed: What kinds of school experiences do trainees report in their remembrances? What influences do these remembrances have on their interpretation of classroom events? Two other questions were posed that differed in the two studies: In study 1, to what extent do trainees report thinking about their school experiences in interpreting a classroom event? In study 2, how do trainees feel about the value of writing remembrances as a course activity?

Study 1: Trainee remembrances, interpretations and thought processes.

Since this study and the next were exploratory in nature and subjective in large part, terms such as "method" or "results" that might suggest an objective, experimental methodology will be avoided. Rather, the description in both studies will be organized under the headings "Procedures" and "Observations." It should be emphasized, however, that care was taken to counter obvious sources of bias; for example, all trainee written products were read "blind" as to the identity of the trainee.

Procedures

The first study was conducted in an undergraduate educational psychology course for preservice elementary teachers. Thirty-one

student trainees were enrolled. The focus of the course was on classroom problems of motivation, learning, discipline, etc. Both general class discussion and small group discussion were directed at an analysis of these and similar problems in terms of relevant psychological concepts.

On the first day of class, the trainees were asked to describe in written form a pleasant and an unpleasant experience that occurred during their elementary school years. During the next meeting of the class, these remembrances were shared by the class members.

As will be noted below, most of the experiences reported dealt with recognition and with punishment. For that reason, four class periods over two weeks were then provided dealing with reward and punishment as psychological concepts. This content focussed particularly on the application of these concepts to classroom management problems. During instruction, no explicit reference was made to the written remembrances. Following instruction, a test was administered in which an episode of presumed cheating was briefly described; the trainees were given two possible actions by the teacher as ways to respond to the incident, one reflecting personal recognition by the teacher that will be referred to as <u>supportive</u> and one that is mildly punitive since it is <u>restrictive</u> of pupil freedom. The trainees were asked whether or not they would follow each action and then to explain their decisions through a psychological rationale. A reproduction of the episode and questions is provided in Figure 1.

Observations

What kinds of experiences were reflected in the remembrances of the trainees? While a wide variety of experiences were reported, a few types of experience account for a substantial proportion of the remembrances. Among pleasant experiences, forty-two percent concerned public recognition or award. Another forty-two percent concerned direct teacher support, being given a responsibility or having some other reason to experience personal pride. Among unpleasant experiences, more than two-thirds (68%) concerned punishment (sometimes physical) or embarrassment associated with disciplinary actions of a teacher. A representative remembrance reflecting both recognition and punishment (these from the same trainee) is provided in Figure 2.

What influence, if any, did these remembrances have on the interpretations of classroom events? To answer this question, the responses to the supportive action recommended by Helen Smith were divided into two groups: responses of those trainees whose remembrances were of personal recognition or support provided by a teacher (termed the Remembrance group) and responses of those whose remembrances were of some other kind of pleasant experience (termed the Non Remembrance group). Responses from those who had described recognition not provided by a teacher (for example, receiving a Girl Scout award) were placed in the Non Remembrance group because of a key dissimilarity of the experience: the exclusion of personal teacher support.

The responses were divided into two groups again in the case

of the restrictive action recommended by Julia Gordon: responses of those whose remembrances were of punishment or embarrassment experienced in the course of being disciplined (Remembrance group) and responses of those whose remembrances were of another kind of unpleasant experience (Non Remembrance group). Excluded from the Remembrance group were responses from those trainees whose remembrances had been of corporal punishment because of the dissimilarity of that type of discipline with the larger share of disciplinary experiences.

The responses of these contrasting groups to the episode described in Figure 1 were then compared in terms of two types of data: favor or disfavor of each recommended action (i.e., would or would not follow it) and the rationale given for each decision. As shown in Table 1, there was a difference in the actions favored between trainees who had reported a pleasant experience involving teacher support and those who had <u>not</u> reported that type of experience. The percentage of those in the Remembrance group who favored a supportive action (15%) was less than one-half that of the Non Remembrance group (39%). A similar difference was found between trainees who had described an unpleasant experience involving punishment by a teacher and those who had <u>not</u> reported that type of experience. The percentage of those in the Remembrance group who favored a restrictive action (12%) was less than one-third that of the Non Remembrance group (40%). Conversely, the percentage of the Remembrance group who expressed disfavor of a restrictive action (75%) was greater than that of the

Non Remembrance group (40%).

Having reported a related kind of pleasant or unpleasant experience did appear to influence the teacher actions that were favored. Those trainees whose pleasant remembrances were of a supportive kind of action less often favored a supportive action; those whose unpleasant remembrances were of a punitive kind of action less often favored a restrictive action. The second finding might have been expected: One who has experienced the discomfort of a punitive action might well be less inclined to favor an action of that kind, especially in light of the evidence that had been presented in class concerning the unpredictable effects of punishment. The first finding, however, appears to be an anomaly. Why would one who had experienced the positive emotions associated with a supportive action and who had been exposed to the evidence on reinforcement as a means of establishing new behaviors be less inclined to favor a supportive action?

In order to shed light on the reasoning that led to the above decisions, it was decided to interview the eight trainees whose pleasant or unpleasant remembrances were most like the suggested actions in the test: four who reported being given a personal responsibility by a teacher and four who had been isolated from the group by a teacher. It is worth noting, first, that <u>none</u> of these eight trainees favored the "matched" teacher action. In other words, with a maximal degree of similarity between experience and proposed action, the trainee was even less likely to favor the proposed action. It is worth noting, second, that only two of the

eight trainees -- in response to a specific oral question -- reported thinking about their remembrances as they responded to the test question. This is an observation to which we will return later in this paper.

Asked to re-evaluate their decisions on the test, three of the eight trainees reaffirmed their original decisions and these reaffirmations all were among the four trainees who had written supportive remembrances. For these three, the fact that misbehavior had involved cheating appeared to be a decisive consideration. They seemed to view cheating within a moral perspective and thus appeared to feel that any show of supportive behavior on the part of the teacher was inappropriate. There was little in the oral responses of the four trainees who had described a punitive experience, in contrast, to help account for their general disfavor of a restrictive action. It might be guessed however, that the class discussion of the limitations of punishment found a more receptive audience among these four trainees than among the general group of trainees.

Study 2: Trainee remembrances, interpretations and evaluations

Study 2 was partly a replication of the previous study, seeking data once again on the types of remembrances reported and their influence on interpretation. However, a "treatment" variable was introduced that was intended to increase the salience of the remembrances; an evaluation by trainees of the value of writing remembrances was also obtained.

Procedures

The study was again conducted in an undergraduate educational psychology course for preservice elementary teachers. Twenty-three students were enrolled. The focus of the class was on the relationship of psychological concepts to "real-life" and simulated experiences. Concepts concerning motivation, learning, peer relationships and similar topical areas were discussed with reference to the latter experiences. Real-life experiences included classroom observation in the schools and the use of remembrances. Simulated methods included peer teaching and the use of videotaped protocols of classroom teaching and problems.

On the first day of class, once again, the trainees each were asked to write a remembrance of a pleasant and unpleasant elementary school experience. In contrast to the procedure in Study 1, these remembrances were not shared until after the interpretive test. Following that, they were used extensively as interpretive episodes during class discussion. Anticipating that remembrances of supportive and punitive experiences would once again be most frequent, a test parallel in theme and format to the test used in Study 1 was prepared. Rather than cheating, it concerned suspected theft of objects and personal possessions by an elementary school child. A reproduction of the test episode and questions is provided in Figure 3.

As expected, more than half of the trainee remembrances reflected the pleasant experience of public or private recognition (52%) or the unpleasant experience of punishment or embarrassment

(61%). First, two of the responses of those who had reported unpleasant remembrances were removed from the data at random. This left twelve responses from trainees who had described supportive remembrances and twelve responses from those who had described punitive remembrances. Each of these groups were then randomly divided into two subgroups of six each. One group of six trainees who had written remembrances of recognition and one group of six trainees who had written remembrances of punishment or embarrassment were then asked to write a more extended description of their experiences focusing on the personal (e.g., emotional, social) consequences of the experience. The purpose of this assignment was to increase the salience of the remembrance. This resulted in three groups who had written pleasant remembrances and three groups who had written unpleasant remembrances. The three groups in each case were:

Extended Remembrance - Had written an extended version of an experience involving recognition (N=6) or punishment/ embarrassment (N=6).

Remembrance - Had written an unextended version of an experience involving recognition (N=6) or punishment/ embarrassment (N=6).

Non Remembrance - Had written of a pleasant (N=11) or unpleasant (N=9) experience that involved neither recognition nor punishment/embarrassment.

At the end of the six week course, the trainees were asked to evaluate anonymously the major real-life and simulated course activities on both a five point scale and by means of an open-ended response. The evaluation criterion in each case was the value of the activity to the trainee.

Observations

As the entries in Table 2 show, proportionately fewer of the trainees in the Extended Remembrance group than in the Remembrance group favored the recommended supportive teacher action. Similarly, proportionately fewer of the Remembrance group trainees than the Non Remembrance group trainees favored the supportive action. As in Study 1, the writing of a remembrance did appear to influence the trainees' decisions in the problem episode; extending and elaborating upon that remembrance appeared to increase its influence. The same trend does not appear in the case of the recommended restrictive teacher action although the Extended Remembrance group still favored restrictive action least frequently.

To shed further light on the differences between groups in interpreting the episode, the written rationales of the six trainees (in response to the directive "...explain your reasoning..." in Figure 3) in each Extended Remembrance group and those of a randomly selected six in each Non Remembrance group were analyzed and compared. In the case of the supportive teacher action, the decisions of the trainees in the Extended Remembrance group were more firmly stated than they were in the Non Remembrance group. This finding is reminiscent of a similar finding in Study 1 in which trainees in the Remembrance group, in oral interviews, more often reaffirmed their original decision.

Also in the case of the supportive action, the explanations or rationales of the Extended Remembrance group tended to be more

concisely explained with more frequent reference to such psychological concepts as reinforcement, off-task behavior, and inhibition of behavior. One had the impression of a more clearly reasoned argument that better conveyed the possibility that teacher support might reinforce inappropriate behavior. In the case of the recommended restrictive action, there was little difference in the nature of the rationales given; virtually all members of both groups called attention to the assumption, rather than the demonstrated fact, of guilt on Wendy's part. In contrast to the finding for the supportive action, moreover, more of the trainees (four of the six) in the Non Remembrance group than in the Extended Remembrance group (one of the six trainees) stated their decisions firmly.

How did the trainees involved in the study feel about the value of writing and sharing remembrances of their school experiences? Reactions of the trainees to the real-life and simulated activities of the class are summarized in Table 3. It is apparent that the trainees viewed the value of classroom observation, peer teaching and remembrances as approximately equal (means of 4.65, 4.36, and 4.57 on a five point scale, with a rating of five indicating substantial value and one indicating little or no value). Viewing of videotaped protocols was viewed as of less value (a mean of 3.68) in significant part because of the "datedness" of some of the classroom scenes. Judging from their open-ended responses, the trainees who commented perceived quite varied kinds of value in the use of remembrances: better

understanding of course content, a different feeling about classroom relationships, reliving what students feel, thinking about self as a teacher and as a student, etc.

Discussion

The foregoing evidence suggests that trainees whose written remembrances were related to a hypothetical classroom event and those whose remembrances were unrelated to the same event interpreted that event differently. The evidence to support this statement is diverse and reasonably consistent although perhaps not generalizable beyond the present paper. It may, however, serve as a fruitful source of hypotheses for further research.

There was, first, a consistent tendency for trainees who had described related experiences to make different decisions about proposed teacher actions than did those who had described unrelated experiences. Specifically, trainees whose remembrances concerned supportive or punitive teacher actions less frequently favored either kind of action in response to suspected cheating or stealing. This disfavor of proposed teacher actions was strongest among (1) those trainees whose pleasant or unpleasant remembrances were most like the specific teacher action proposed and (2) those trainees who had written more extended, elaborated remembrances.

The interpretive basis for these differences in decision-making was not entirely clear. However, it appeared to lie in part in differing attention to certain key dimensions of each event. In Study 1, it will be recalled that the trainees in the Remembrance group (i.e., those who had described supportive teacher

experiences) were very concerned about the moral dimension of cheating and may have seen that as an incongruity with their own experience. Thus, they less often favored a supportive teacher action in that case. In the case of Study 2, in contrast, the trainees in both the Extended Remembrance and Non Remembrance groups were commonly concerned with the assumption of guilt; they were also about equally disinclined to favor a restrictive action.

There was some evidence that the quality of psychological reasoning was reflected in decision-making as well. The rationales written by the trainees in the Extended Remembrance group in Study 2 were distinguishable from those of the Non Remembrance group on a quality criterion in the case of a supportive teacher action. In this case, the groups differed in decisions as well, the Non Remembrance group more clearly favoring a supportive action. Decisions by the two groups were more alike in the case of a restrictive action as was the quality of their rationales.

Despite these differences in interpretation, few of the trainees who had described relevant experiences showed evidence of being aware of these experiences in interpreting the problem episode. Only two of the eight trainees interviewed in Study 1 were sure that they had thought of their remembrance in responding to the problem posed. Furthermore, there was no explicit reference to a related remembrance in <u>any</u> of the written interpretations in either study. While these observations are surprising, they do not necessarily invalidate the rationale of the study. It was assumed that the influence of personal experience would be through the

mediation of schemas abstracted from experience; schemas, in turn, may well be unverbalized and still affect cognitive processes.

Might one expect that personal experience as reflected in a remembrance would typically be associated with a less favorable view of a related teacher action? Does experience breed skepticism? Here, one can only speculate but it is fair to say that nothing in the present evidence would suggest so. The limited evidence available here suggests that personal experience is reflected in a conditionality and, together with instruction, a refinement in interpretation that can lead to divergent decisions. In the present case, those decisions tended towards disfavor of teacher actions. Given different problem episodes, those decisions might tend towards greater favor.

Finally, the positive perceptions that the trainees in Study 2 expressed of the value of writing and sharing remembrances suggests that this activity is instructionally useful. The remembrance activity compared favorably with classroom observation and peer teaching as adjunct experiences in an educational psychology course. The findings in Study 2 that favored the trainees who were assigned to write extended remembrances suggests that remembrances should be elaborated upon as much as possible to bring the greatest influence to bear on interpretation.

References

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Figure 1

Test Episodes and Questions: Study 1.

Ms. O'Connor, a third grade teacher, has suspected for some time that Susan has been cheating in class. Susan always has been a poor speller but suddenly has improved. The problem is that her correctly spelled words are identical to her friend Kathy's who sits next to her. Furthermore, Ms. O'Connor has seen Susan look up the answers to problems on her arithmetic tests by checking the back of the book, something that Ms. O'Connor has forbidden.

Ms. O'Connor seeks the advice of Helen Smith and Julia Gordon, two more experienced teachers in her school. Below is the advice given by each. Tell what you think of the advice of <u>each</u>: Would you follow it? Why or why not?

Helen Smith - appoint Susan to hand out and pick up the spelling tests after the test is over, checking to see that the student's name is on each.

Julia Gordon - have Susan move to a seat in front of your desk during tests.

Figure 2

Pleasant and Unpleasant Remembrances of a Single Trainee

A. When I was in the third grade, I had a very positive experience. I had Mrs. ----- for my teacher. She was new that year, so I was a little scared the first couple days of class. But I quickly learned how sweet she was and what a good teacher! One day my best friend and I stayed in for recess. We were sitting there playing a game when she came up to us and asked if we would help her grade some papers....we were thrilled! We felt so grown up and important.

B. When I was in the fourth grade, I had a teacher named Mrs. ----. She was a very cross teacher and always made me feel stupid. One day when she was reading to us, she looked over at me and said, "----, go out in the hall!" I was shocked! I had no idea what she was talking about. I had never been yelled at let alone sent out to the hall. Reluctantly, I went out to the hall where I sat and cried for about twenty minutes. Then Mrs. ----- came out into the hall and said I could go back into the classroom. To this day, I don't know why I got in trouble; she never told me.

Table 1

Percentages of Remembrance and Non Remembrance Groups Favoring or Not Favoring Recommended Teacher Actions

Supportive Teacher Action

	Remembrance[1] N=13		Non Remembrance N=18	
Favor	2	(15%)	7	(39%)
Not Favor	8	(61%)	9	(50%)
Uncertain	3	(23%)	2	(11%)

Restrictive Teacher Action

	Remembrance N=16		Non Remembrance N=15	
Favor	2	(12%)	6	(40%)
Not Favor	12	(75%)	6	(40%)
Uncertain	2	(12%)	3	(20%)

[1]Trainees in the Remembrance group had early in the course written about a supportive and/or punitive experience in elementary school. Trainees in the Non Remembrance group had written about other kinds of experience.

Figure 3

Test Episode and Questions: Study 2

Mona Smith is a new fourth grade teacher in your school. She has encountered a problem with Wendy. During free reading time, Mona allows the children to move around the room freely to get new books, go to the reading corner to sit, etc. She feels that this creates a comfortable atmosphere and also allows her time to work with individual children.

However, small things have been disappearing from her desk and the book shelves -- easily "pocketed" things like a packet of lens cleaners, a stray buckle, a pocket pencil sharpener. She has noticed that Wendy has been around her desk and the shelves frequently. One time she caught Wendy looking for something on her (Mona's) desktop but Wendy said she just needed a paper clip. Another time she found Wendy with a folding pocket comb that another child reported missing; Wendy said she found it on the playground.

Mona has sought advice from Jane Grey and Susan Simpson, two other teachers. They gave conflicting advice and now Mona has come to you. Below is the advice given by the two teachers; indicate whether you would support or not support the advice of each teacher and explain your reasoning.

Jane Grey - ask Wendy to serve as your class monitor during free reading to bring you any problems that occur like lost books, two wanting the same book, etc.

Susan Simpson - restrict Wendy to her seat during free reading for one week to see if things keep disappearing.

Table 2

Percentages of Extended Remembrances, Remembrance and Non Remembrance Groups Favoring or Not Favoring Recommended Teacher Actions

Supportive Teacher Action

	Extended Remembrance N=6		Remembrance N=6		Non Remembrance N=11	
Favor	2	(33%)	4	(66%)	8	(73%)
Not Favor	3	(50%)	2	(33%)	2	(18%)
Uncertain	1	(16%)	0	(0%)	1	(9%)

Restrictive Teacher Action

	Extended Remembrance N=6		Remembrance N=6		Non Remembrance N=9	
Favor	0	(0%)	2	(33%)	2	(22%)
Not Favor	5	(83%)	4	(66%)	7	(77%)
Uncertain	1	(16%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)

Table 3

Trainee Ratings of Value of Course Experiences

Scale value of 5 = Substantial value

Scale value of 1 = Little or no value

Classroom observation	4.65
Writing/Sharing remembrances	4.33
Peer Teaching	4.36
Videotaped protocols	3.68